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ABSTRACT

A needs assessment was conducted to determine the degree to which Pittsburgh Public Schools were meeting the educational needs of their students. Different groups were surveyed to determine their perceptions of conditions in the district. Data collection and analysis established the status of children's educational needs. The district's most serious problems were: improving student achievement in basic skills; implementing procedures for personnel evaluation; attracting and maintaining students; managing the impact of enrollment decline to control costs and increase quality; and developing a strategy for individual school improvement. The results were disseminated through interactive slide show sessions and written reports. Utilization of needs assessment results are of concern to evaluators. Three categories of use are instrumental, conceptual, and persuasive. Factors influencing utilization are timing; identification of a primary client; evaluation design; avoidance of political attacks; variety of research strategies; substantive knowledge of education as a process and structure; preliminary testing of survey instruments; atmosphere for presentation of results; and the credibility of data. The authors recommend a client orientation approach for school district evaluation. (DWH)

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THE UTILIZATION OF A DISTRICT-WIDE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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In his excellent review of needs assessments in educational evaluation, Stufflebeam (1977) points out that he found actual examples of needs assessments to be "a much better source of operational guidance for doing needs assessments than was the theoretical literature of evaluation" (p. 10). Similarly, Alkin, Daillak and White (1979) demonstrate the value of case studies in contributing to an understanding of evaluation utilization.

It is in that spirit that we relate this experience about the conduct of a needs assessment done for the Pittsburgh Public Schools. This paper summarizes how the assessment was conducted and how it was used. We think it worth telling because it may be useful to other districts that are contemplating doing a district-wide needs assessment, and also because it has implications for improving the utility of school district evaluation efforts.

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Background

First, it is necessary to provide a description of the context for this work. The Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC) is a university-based R&D center that receives most of its funding from the National Institute of Education. Within LRDC, the Evaluation Research Unit is working on ways to improve evaluation research. This group represents a mixture of full and part time faculty, graduate students, and support staff.

One of the questions being addressed by the Evaluation Unit is how to improve district-based evaluation studies so that the results of local research efforts can be used to improve local school practices. We have chosen to work on school district evaluation by doing it, as opposed to observing or surveying what existing district-based offices are doing. This is possible because the Pittsburgh Public Schools, the school district in which LRDC is located, does not have an evaluation office. In establishing a working relationship with the District, the Evaluation Unit gained a site for further understanding evaluation research. The District gained an evaluation research capability that would otherwise be beyond its current means.

There are currently 45,000 students enrolled in the Pittsburgh Public Schools, which represents a steady decline from the early seventies when over 75,000 students were enrolled in the District. Policy is set by a nine member, elected school board in cooperation with the superintendent of schools and a central administrative bureaucracy. There are approximately 3,200 teachers and support staff on the payroll. Like most Northeastern, urban districts, Pittsburgh faces a familiar set

of problems that include declining enrollment, rising costs, shrinking tax bases and rising demands.

Over the two years prior to the Fall of 1980, we had developed a good working relationship with the District, building up the trust and confidence that this kind of effort requires. Most of our projects with district administrators were specific program evaluations. In the Spring of 1980, however, things became a little untidy. The District's latest desegregation plan was rejected by the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission; the School Board chose not to renew the Superintendent's contract; and the teacher's union announced that they would go on strike in the fall if their demands were not met. Of course, these are the kinds of events that urban districts are experiencing all the time. Eventually the teacher's contract was settled, a desgregation plan was approved, and the School Board selected Richard Wallace as their new Superintendent.

The needs assessment story begins on September 10, 1980 when we met with the new superintendent and offered the continued assistance of the Evaluation Unit. During our first meeting, he indicated that it would be very important to conduct a district-wide needs assessment that would enable him to establish priorities for the District. Several subsequent meetings with the Superintendent were held to define the general nature, purpose and procedures to be used for this assessment.

The primary purpose of the assessment was to determine the degree to which the Pittsburgh Public Schools were meeting the educational needs of the children in the District, and do it in a way which would suggest priorities for improving the educational program in the District. The general objective was to identify conditions in the

District that can and should be improved.

Components of the Needs Assessment

Two approaches were used in this assessment. One approach was to survey different groups regarding their perceptions of current conditions in the District. The groups sampled included administrators, board members, counselors, custodians, nurses, paraprofessionals, parents, principals and other building administrators, psychologists, school secretaries, security guards, social workers, students, supervisors, teachers, and other Pittsburgh citizens. A task force consisting of representatives of many of these different groups was established to assist in the design of the surveys. Over 1000 people participated in the surveys.

The other approach to the assessment involved collecting and analyzing existing school district data in order to establish the current status of the educational needs of the children. Such data included student achievement, failure and dropout rates, attendance, suspensions, and demographic descriptions of the students in each school, as well as data describing the resources available in the school, such as the number of teachers. The resulting data base covered the past five years. This made it possible to examine trends over time as well as relationships among the many different variables in any given year.

Results

The results were organized in terms of five broad areas that were found to be the District's most pressing needs. Although some groups ranked them differently than others, there was consensus that these are the District's most pressing problems: (1) improve student achievement in basic skills, (2) implement procedures for personnel evaluation, (3) attract and hold students, (4) manage the impact of enrollment decline in order to hold down unwanted costs and increase quality where it is needed, and (5) develop a strategy for improving individual schools.

The more specific survey results and the five-year data base were used to further define the nature of each of these problem areas, and possible strategies for dealing with them. The student achievement issue illustrates this approach.

Need to Improve Student Achievement

The improvement of student achievement was identified as the number one problem in the District by most survey respondents. This fact was not surprising since previous reports of standardized test results in the District had received much attention. The achievement problem that had been previously highlighted was that students began to fall behind national norms at about the fourth grade. The phrase "fourth grade slump" was commonly heard during Board deliberations of achievement issues.

As part of this needs assessment, additional analyses were conducted to determine possible reasons for this decline. A major achievement problem identified in the analyses was that a large number of children leave third grade still not reading well enough to use reading in subsequent learning. The test results indicated that approximately 25 percent of the students completed third grade with inadequate reading comprehension skills. It was also noted that this percentage varied considerably among schools. That is, in some schools as many as 50 percent of the children did not comprehend what they read as they entered fourth grade, whereas in other schools, all of the children seemed to be reading well enough to begin fourth grade.

In an attempt to improve achievement, the District offers many remedial programs for children who are not learning from normal classroom instruction. These programs include Title I, Project Pass, special education programs for the mildly handicapped (e.g., LD and EMR) and the 12th grade remedial program. Such programs have become so extensive in the District that in some grade levels, 50 percent of the children are participating in one or more of these remedial efforts. As part of the assessment, the current structure of remedial programs was investigated, and the results indicated that lack of coordination among the various remedial efforts was a serious problem.

An examination of the achievement levels of the students in these remedial programs suggested that these different programs are serving students with similar achievement problems. Thus, children may be labeled and isolated for special treatments in spite of the fact that children with different labels appear to be having similar academic difficulties and are receiving similar treatments under these different

labels. That is, different programs were trying to work on similar problems, often with the same general strategies, but the teachers and supervisors involved were not benefitting from each other's experiences. Different supervisory staff were assigned to the different programs, even in the same building.

Another need was to improve the coordination between what was taught in the remedial program and what was taught in the student's regular classroom. Teachers, principals and supervisors all recognized this as a critical task for improving remedial instruction. This assessment suggested the need to integrate the remedial services insofar as possible, reduce the use of stigmatizing labels for these children, and put the focus on the early grades so that students develop the basic skills before they move into the intermediate grades.

Other Needs Identified

In addition to achievement, the other four major problem areas were examined using both survey and existing District data. A summary report is available from the authors ("A Needs Assessment of the Pittsburgh Public Schools"), but it is useful to provide a brief description of the other results in this paper.

Personnel evaluation was one of the most consistently mentioned problems by the people who work in the District. Few seemed happy with present procedures. Employees wanted their evaluation oriented toward improving job performance, and felt it was important to clarify who is responsible for evaluating whom and how those evaluations should be done.

Another serious problem facing the Pittsburgh schools is the increasing proportion of children going elsewhere for their education. It seemed to many that this was threatening the health and vitality of the public schools, which have been and should continue to be a critical ingredient in this democracy. The major reason people gave for avoiding the public schools was that student discipline is a serious problem. Teachers and principals agreed that there was a lack of alternatives for dealing with discipline problems and a need to consistently enforce policies.

The need to manage enrollment decline also emerged as a priority area. On a per pupil basis, costs were going up faster than one would expect from inflation. This was primarily because fixed building costs were being spread over fewer students in each school, and class sizes were getting smaller. Although smaller classes can be an important component of a strategy for improving the quality of classroom instruction, the reduction in class size was very uneven and did not occur where it was needed. The assessment concluded that the money saved by closing additional schools can be used to increase the quality of the educational program where it is most needed.

The needs assessment also suggested focusing upon individual schools because most of the identified needs must be attacked at the building level, and because some schools are clearly in greater need of improvement than others. An index of school descriptors was developed that indicated where to begin a focused school improvement effort. It was suggested that a detailed diagnosis of the needs of the identified schools could be the basis for designing improvement strategies in each school.

Dissemination

Dissemination of these results took place between January 13 and March 5, 1981. Two approaches were used, interactive slide show sessions and written reports. The former proved to be especially useful in both getting the message across as well as sharpening the message through helpful comments offered by the audiences. The schedule was as follows:

Superintendent	January 13
Superintendent and School Board President	January 20
The Board of Education	January 24
Central Administration	February 12
Building Administrators and Supervisors	February 24
Teachers	February 25
Task Force	March 3
Press Conference	March 5

Each dissemination session involved looking at the results, with overhead slides and handouts, in an interactive mode. This was particularly true of the meeting with the nine-member Board for whom a one-day retreat to a nearby college campus was arranged. For the 3000 teachers, however, we had to settle for a one-hour TV presentation which they viewed in their buildings. This was followed by a discussion of the results among the faculty and building administrators in each school.

The written reports were kept short. We prepared a two-page abstract, with the level of detail illustrated on page 7, a 16-page summary detailed to the degree of the achievement discussion, and six special topic papers, running about ten pages each, on themes of particular interest: achievement, discipline, communications, personnel

evaluation, organizational structure, and school improvement. We also prepared a memo for the Superintendent which summarized specific "suggestions to the new superintendent" that emerged from the surveys of the various groups.

Utilization

This section presents a discussion of what is meant by utilization, followed by a description of some of the ways in which the needs assessment has been utilized in the months following its dissemination. We then go on to examine the factors that seemed to influence the utilization that has occurred, and then briefly relate this experience to the emerging literature on utilization.

A Definition of Utilization

As researchers have become more and more concerned about the extent to which evaluation results are being utilized, there has been a concomitant interest in determining what constitutes use. Part of the reason for the interest in defining use stems from the fact that many researchers were reaching the conclusion that evaluation research was used very little in policy formation and decision-making. (Worthen & Sanders, 1973; Rossi, 1972; Dexter, 1966; Guba, 1969; Mann, 1972; Cohen and Garet, 1975; Lynn, 1978; Cook, 1978).

Some researchers, unwilling to accept the rather bleak picture of utilization, argued that the definition of use being applied was too narrow. A definition of use founded on the notion that a major policy decision would turn on the production of a single piece of evaluation research was hopelessly disadvantaged in any attempt to find instances of use. This was thought to be so for two reasons. First, such a definition was naive about the policy process itself. Decision-makers reach a decision through an often amorphous set of minor decisions, meetings, and interactions with constitutencies. Weiss (1980) describes this process as "decision by accretion." Second, a concentration on the traditional definition had the effect of actually screening the many different uses that actually occur at more modest and mundane levels as a decision accretion process takes place.

Proponents of a broader view of utilization include Weiss 1979; Alkin, et al., 1979; and Patton, 1978. Weiss (1979) has offered seven categories of use, each bound to particular aspects of the decision-making process. Patton suggests that looking for utilization requires that you look for gradual changes in the policy process or decision-maker's viewpoint over time, where a piece of evaluation information is one of a number of data considered by the decision-maker. Alkin et al. (1979) write that use occurs when, among other things, "evaluation information. . .[is]. . .used. . .in making decisions, substantiating decisions or actions or altering attitudes" (p. 226).

Although we agree with those writers that view use as occurring in many forms, in this report we have chosen to describe relatively straightforward examples of use that would, in all likelihood, fit most traditional definitions. This was done for two reasons. First, the

fact that direct use has occurred is in and of itself important to record. Second, finding good methods for systematically tracking and documenting the more subtle uses that are occurring is a problem that is being worked on but is by no means satisfactorily resolved at this time. It is hoped that as more data are collected, more can be said about subtle uses of evaluation research in subsequent papers.

Among the variety of writers who have examined the issue of what constitutes utilization, the review of research by Leviton and Hughes (1981) is particularly helpful. In this synthesis, they identify three broad categories of use: "instrumental, conceptual and persuasive" (p.4). Briefly, instrumental use occurs when specific instances could be documented of ways in which research was being used for decision-making or problem-solving purposes. Conceptual use occurs when a policy maker's thinking about a particular issue is influenced by a piece of evaluation information. Persuasive use occurs when evaluation information is used to support or defend a particular position or policy. Using these three categories of use as a basic structure, examples of how district decision-makers used the results of the needs assessment are reported in the next section.

Examples of Use

The first indication that the assessment was going to be used came in the form of a news release on the Monday following the weekend retreat with the Superintendent and Board when the preliminary results of the needs assessment were described in detail. Here are important excerpts from that release.

"Wallace Announces Plans for School Improvement"

> Pittsburgh, P.. January 26, 1981 . . . . . Superintendent of Schools Richard C. Wallace today announced that he will immediately begin to develop "action plans" for the School District that focus on two major areas, school improvemement and cost effective management. . . .
>
> The decision to focus on the two major areas was made jointly by Wallace and members of the Board of Education after they had the opportunity to review preliminary results of the districtwide needs assessment initiated by the superintendent shortly after he took office in the Fall. . . .
>
> "This needs assessment information combined with other educational data, such as an analysis of test scores over the past five years, helped us establish the priorities," Wallace said. "Once we develop the action plans, all of us in the District can channel our energies in the same direction and respond to concerns identified by the groups of people the school serve."

On February 25, the Board passed the resolution that adopted school improvement and cost effective management as the top two priorities for the District. In that resolution, the Board agreed to "assign resources and concentrate its efforts to resolve problems within these priority areas, in relation to:

1. Student achievement in the basic skills
2. Staff evaluation
3. Student discipline
4. Attracting and holding students
5. Enrollment decline
6. Increasing the effectiveness of individual schools."

The resolution made it clear that the two priority areas and the six specific needs surfaced as major concerns as the result of the district-

wide needs assessment. Five of the six priority areas were stated in language identical to that used in the assessment. The addition of discipline as a separate priority was a modification that occurred during the dissemination process as early drafts had included this issue under the priority of attracting and holding students. More will be said about how and why this change came about in the following section.

As indicated in the January press release, the Superintendent set in motion the development of action plans for each priority area. Task forces established for this purpose consisted of representatives of various segments of the District and each group worked toward a July 15 deadline, at which time detailed action plans were presented to the Board as a follow-up to their February 25 resolution. The Board was given two months to review the action plans, and on September 23, one year from the initiation of the assessment, they were formally adopted.

The presentation by the Superintendent to the Board of the results of the assessment and the passage by the Board of the priority areas identified in the plan is a straightforward example of what Leviton and Hughes (1981) have described as instrumental use of evaluation information. Research was commissioned to identify current conditions in need of improvement in the District. Summary reports were prepared and presentations were made. On the basis of these data, the Board resolved to attack the identified problems through the development of specific action plans and through the allocation of District resources to support these plans.

The needs assessment process also provides an excellent example of what Leviton and Hughes (1981) have called conceptual use, ways in which evaluation information has influenced the way decision-makers think about a problem. Identification of conceptual use is not contingent upon a piece of evaluation information directly influencing a specific decision, program or issue. The influence of the study on achievement undertaken as part of the needs assessment is an example of conceptual utilization.

As noted earlier, achievement reports prepared by the District's Testing Office had identified a decline in achievement starting at about the fourth grade and gradually increasing through the middle school years. The term "fourth grade slump" had become a common term used among Board members during the past several years to describe the achievement issue in the District. Also, remedial programs in the District were expanding into the middle and upper grades in an attempt at dealing with that "slump."

The needs assessment more closely examined the achievement levels being attained by District students in the primary (1 - 3) grades. District managers were shown that twenty-five percent of the students were bringing serious reading problems into the fourth grade and that the root of the problem lay with the instruction being received in the early years. The net effect of this research has been to begin to refocus the attention of Distict managers upon instruction in the primary grades as a way of solving the decline in test scores in the District that begins in the fourth grade.

The needs assessment process, as distinguished from the needs assessment results, provides an example of utilization for persuasive purposes. This has occurred at a variety of levels in the District and in a number of ways. The persuasive use in the context of Superintendent-Board relations is illustrative.

When the new Superintendent took office in the Fall of 1980, he was confronted with a nine member, elected Board that had a recent history of sharp division and fragmentation. The primary issue of contention among Board members had been over plans for district-wide desegregation. The termination of the previous superintendent had, in large measure, been the result of a failure to work out a solid majority on the Board for any single desegregation strategy. Fortunately for the newly arriving Superintendent, the desegregation issue per se had temporarily been relegated to the "back burner" for the Board. An uneasy and fragile coalition of six Board members had passed a plan the previous summer. While litigation challenging the plan was underway, there was a general consensus on the Board that everyone should pull together to make the opening of the school year as quiet and reassuring to a nervous public as possible. There also seemed to be a feeling of exhaustion among many Board members over the acrimony that had attended so many of the discussions on desegregation. There was a willingness to let the courts (or the elections to come in 1982) stimulate new moves.

Arriving with a knowledge of this context, the new Superintendent seemed to have sensed the time was ripe for some new initiatives in the District. As an "outsider" (the previous three superintendents had come up through the system) he had the advantage of being able to take a fresh look at the issues. He also was not bound by previous

relationships and commitments likely to be built up during a career-long rise within a single district. Yet, the problem remained of how to develop some consensus for action among board members that had been so recently divided. The development of a needs assessment, especially that component of the assessment that surveyed all of the major constituencies of the District, was an important mechanism for building a consensus for action among Board members. Issues identified through an assessment process clearly could not be attributed to the special interest of one or the other of the Board factions. As such, the assessment provided a "neutral ground", in effect, for building a new consensus among key decision-makers in the District. Similar persuasive uses of the assessment results could be noted in the Superintendent's relationships with his own central administrative staff. The point here is simply that the assessment process did indeed fulfill a persuasive use as defined by Leviton and Hughes (1981).

Although examples of instrumental, conceptual, and persuasive utilization have been treated as discrete entities, it is not the intent here (nor is it the intent of Leviton and Hughes) to leave the impression that these are necessarily mutually exclusive categories. For example, the achievement study cited as having conceptual use may eventually also turn out to have an instrumental use to the extent that, over time, programs, policies, and resources are shifted as a result of the realization that the fourth grade slump can be reduced by improving primary grade instruction. Nevertheless, the three categories are helpful in describing the complex influences evaluation information can have. In the following section, discussion is provided that considers some of the features of this assessment that may have contributed to its utility. Although this is highly speculative on our part, it seems

important to reflect on the utilization question so that this experience and others like it might begin to suggest procedures for school district evaluations that will increase their potential for improving educational programs.

Factors That Influenced Utilization

Turning to the factors that may have influenced use of the needs assessment, it should be noted that no single factor or set of factors seemed to be sufficient in guaranteeing that the evaluation information would be utilized. For District evaluators considering the question of use, this experience suggests that one should think in terms of increasing the probability of use rather than looking for the key technique or strategy that would insure utilization.

Timing. The needs assessment seemed to be the right task at the right time. It has already been noted that the decision by the Superintendent to call for an assessment was heavily influenced by the context of recent Board division over the desegregation issue. For his new administration, the assessment provided a new start for new initiatives, and most importantly a "neutral" ground upon which some Board consensus could be constructed that would not be diminished by the acrimony characteristic of the previous months. The Board members seemed somewhat relieved by the opportunity for a "fresh start" in their own deliberations. The importance of timing has been noted by some researchers (e.g., Hill, 1980; Patton, 1978), and questioned by others (e.g., King & Thompson, 1981).

A client was clearly identified. The Superintendent was the primary client and the evaluation team worked closely with him during the design, analysis and dissemination phases of the needs assessment. While the ultimate users of the results ranged widely across the District from the School Board to individual program or school managers, it was felt to be extremely important that a single client guided the basic structure of the evaluation. Given the political climate in the District, to have attempted to explicitly serve multiple clients might easily have led to producing evaluation results that would not be usable by any group. Hill (1980) has a useful analysis, in the context of Congressional evaluation research, of the importance of identifying one's client to facilitate utilization.

It should also be noted, however, that while the single client approach can clearly and positively influence use, it can also create problems for a district evaluator. Keeping to a single client was not an easily managed task. Just to give one example, when instruments to be used in the survey were piloted among several task forces representing the various constituencies to be polled, there was strong pressure from individuals representing middle management (principals) to keep questions about how they should be evaluated off of the instruments. The Superintendent, as primary client, was the final arbiter and insisted that the evaluation question remain (although in modified form) in the survey. As it turned out, evaluation of personnel surfaced as one of the six priorities identified by the District.

Another example concerns a problem that is ethical in nature. When does serving a client to insure use begin to impinge upon the responsibility of the evaluator which is presumably to report results as forthrightly as possible? This is a fine line, especially hard to distinguish in that it might be crossed as easily through acts of omission as through any gross "massaging" of data. In the needs assessment experience there was a double advantage of, (1) having a client who was quite willing to "let the chips fall where they may" and, (2) having the evaluation research conducted by individuals outside of the District power structure and thus, presumably, less vulnerable to unwarranted influence. As Cronbach (1980) notes in another context, the best that can be said on this issue of the client-evaluator relationship is that "the crucial ethical problem appears to be freedom to communicate during and after the study, subject to the legitimate concerns for privacy, national security, and faithfulness to contractual commitments" (p 6).

Nature of the evaluation design. The design of the needs assessment was established in a way that, in itself, encouraged utilization at various levels in the District. For example, summaries of the surveys of various constituencies were prepared that not only identified problem areas, but also developed credible ways of establishing which areas were most important and for what groups. In addition, the survey elicited possible solutions to specific problem areas. Thus, information linking specific problems to a range of alternative solutions was available to decision-makers giving them both a sense of the key issues and also ideas about how to start attacking these problems.

Personal characteristics of the user. The Superintendent as the primary client had a stake in seeing that the research was implemented and used. A number of authors have noted the importance of user characteristics in influencing use (e.g., Cronbach, 1980; Kennedy, Apling, Neumann, 1980). In this case, the Superintendent clearly had a large stake in using the information for building a consensus for action among his various constituencies in the District. He also happened to have a strong research background that made him both comfortable with evaluation research methodology as well as committed to using research to help inform the policy process. Both of these factors insured the on-going involvement of the primary client. It might be noted that this interest on the part of the Superintendent was especially crucial to the data collection activities in the analytical phase of the assessment. Access to data was greatly facilitated in the District's bureaucracy because of the visible importance attached to the activity by the Superintendent.

Avoidance of political land mines. Information was summarized in ways that remained true to what respondents were attempting to communicate while at the same time avoiding personal attacks on individuals. Once said, this point is perhaps obvious to all. However, given that a number of questions on the survey were open-ended in nature, the possibility (and, as it turned out, the fact) that some of the data could be construed as personal attacks made it important to summarize the points without the invective. This is justified on grounds that a public airing of data at a personal level might well inflame the dissemination process to such an extent as to hinder the larger purpose of the assessment. Perhaps more importantly, such discretion is warranted in a situation where, as is the case of an

anonymous survey respondent, the "accused" cannot behold and challenge the accuser.

Variety of research strategies used. The combined use of surveys and detailed analyses of existing data bases contributed to the probability that the results of the assessment would be used. (See Cronbach, 1980.) The survey data provided important data about the perceptions of key constituencies. This information was especially (but not exclusively) useful as a way of gauging the political needs and stress points in the District as far as potential program initiatives were concerned. Yet, the identification of problem areas was clearly not enough to lead decision-makers to a program of action.

In some instances, problems were identified but the solution proposed was either ambiguous or altogether absent. The achievement issue is a good case in point. Almost all survey respondents recognized that there was a problem. However, the specific nature of the problem, as well as the examination of what to do about it, could be best done by looking at some long-term trends in District data and programming. The point is that in this experience no single research strategy was sufficient to fully address the client's interests, and, the questions being addressed dictated the methodological strategies employed rather than the reverse.

Technology versus substantive knowledge. The experience of this case study suggests that in district evaluation research, elegant applications of sophisticated analytical technologies can be less important in influencing utilization than the employment of a sound knowledge of educational structure and the politics that influence it. While some relatively sophisticated methodologies were employed in the

analysis of existing data bases, the results produced would have been less interpretable, and certainly less intelligible to decision-makers, without an indepth understanding of how specific programs, schools and classes were organized in the District. This is not to suggest that sophisticated statistical techniques cannot be relevant, but rather, that these are only useful to the extent that they fit the question and that the results produced can be interpreted in the context of the District's educational realities. Perhaps the most powerful "metric" provided in the entire assessment process was the "twenty-five percent" figure of students leaving third grade not reading well enough to learn from subsequent reading. In a related point, it should also be noted that research jargon is rarely useful in communicating with decision-makers. In every report and presentation, attempts were made to delete such language from the research to be reported.

The issue of technology versus substantive knowledge raises the corollary issue of what might be the best background and training strategies for preparing individuals to work as district evaluators. Lyon, Doscher, McGranahan, and Williams (1978) report that about forty-two percent of those surveyed did not have a background in teaching. Many have backgrounds in hard sciences. The Pittsburgh experience suggests that some background, or at least understanding of education as a process and structure, is useful in helping an evaluator frame the issues for research.

Pilot testing the instruments. The research design benefitted from pilot testing the survey instruments with representatives of constituencies to be surveyed. Questions were invariably sharpened, dropped or added as a result of interactions with task forces set up for

this purpose. It should be noted, however, that in testing instruments there is a chance that unwanted shaping of the evaluation can occur. Certainly the pressure exerted on the research team to eliminate personnel evaluation questions was an example of how early testing of the instrument can embroil the evaluation in controversy even before the first stages of the research are completed. While recognizing this danger, on balance, the experience in Pittsburgh suggests that pilot testing can greatly improve the research design by sharpening the focus of the questions and that this can do much towards increasing the relevance of the final results.

How you report it can make a difference. The research team chose to use an interactive style as a primary mechanism for reporting research results. One example of this was the all day retreat arranged by the Superintendent for the Board. The entire agenda consisted of the reporting and discussion of the preliminary results of the assessment. The presentation to the Board was tried out ahead of time in several private forums (one meeting with colleagues at the research center, one with the Superintendent and another with the Superintendent and Board President) to work on the structure of the program and the intelligibility of the results.

The actual presentation to the Board occurred at a college campus away from the District's administrative offices and local media representatives that regularly cover Board meetings. With distractions thus kept at minimum and with an entire day set aside for discussion, the presentations by the Superintendent and the evaluation team took place in an atmosphere that tended to maximize dialogue. One example of how this setting and style of dissemination influenced use through the

involvement of the audience can be seen in the emergence of a sixth priority from the needs assessment (i.e., discipline) in the final report. Although discipline had been included as part of the original message, it was subsumed by the evaluation team under the "attracting and holding students" issue. The Board clearly felt that this issue deserved to be highlighted as a separate issue given the strength of the results presented. Final evaluation reports reflected this reorganization. The interaction between the evaluators and potential users in this instance provided an opportunity to recast the results in ways that increased the "investment" users had in the results.

One final comment on reporting strategies concerns the style of reports offered as back-up to the numerous presentations that were made. Four different reports were prepared. Each report varied as to content, detail and format in relation to the prospective audience and potential use to be made of the information by that audience. For example, a brief summary of highlights was prepared for use with media. Results and District follow-up plans were stressed. A sixteen-page summary of results organized by priority issue was prepared for use in Board deliberations. More detailed and lengthy analyses of survey data by issue, but not confined to the six priority areas, were written for administrative personnel interested in specific problems and solutions identified by respondents. Finally, specific suggestions from the survey for the new Superintendent were prepared as a memo to him. With the exception of the memo to the Superintendent, all reports were made available to the public and to constituencies in the public. This approach allowed individuals to seek the level of detail that they might want for their own purposes without necessarily overburdening each reader with a mountain of information if he/she was simply seeking a

quick summary of the results. The utility of an approach that seeks to vary reporting and dissemination strategies with the make-up of potential users has been noted elsewhere in the literature (e.g., Datta, 1979, Sproull & Larkey, 1979).

Credibility of the data. Some of the findings "rang true" for some potential users, confirming their own experiences. Some of the findings were surprising to potential users but the evidence offered was both understandable and convincing. In each of these cases, the credibility of the data clearly influenced District decision-makers in their willingness to use the evaluation information. An example of information confirming existing beliefs was the finding that discipline was of primary importance to parents sending their children to private rather than public schools. The Superintendent and individual members of the Board had personal experiences that confirmed this finding.

The analyses of achievement and the "fourth grade slump" was an example of potential users being surprised by a finding but, ultimately, being convinced by the evidence that was presented. The statistic mentioned earlier that appoximately twenty-five percent of the third graders leave that grade unable to read well enough to learn from subsequent reading, seemed to have a powerful impact on the thinking of District decision-makers.

Concluding Comments

The factors discussed in the previous section are offered with the caveats that no single variable insures utilization and that any evaluator attempting to improve use should think in terms of increased probabilities, varying strategies with the context and type of evaluation. As our work in school district evaluation continues, there will be further opportunities to confirm or question the relative strengths of some of the variables noted above. However, having said that no single strategy is sufficent, we would like to briefly return to one variable, client orientation, that, if not sufficient, is at least the place to start in improving the probabilities of use in school district research.

Most evaluation research in a school district will have the potential for multiple user audiences. In stressing that the Superintendent was the primary client of the needs assessment, the emphasis must be on primary and not exclusive. The public, the Board, district managers were all clearly secondary clients and potential users of the information. The importance to the evaluator of having a primary client lies in his/her ability to sufficiently define the questions to be addressed to avoid what Tukey (as quoted in Raiffa, 1968) has called Type III error: not asking the right question. It is our impression that identifying a primary client and establishing a frank dialogue with that client through both evaluation design and implementation phases of the work greatly enhances the chances that the results of an evaluation will be used.

In suggesting a client orientation approach for school district evaluation, it is recognized that certain problems can occur. The ethical question discussed in a previous section is one example. A second problem lies in the fact that strong client-evaluator communication is very often not part of the tradition of school district relationships. A recent survey (King &, Thompson, 1981) of the perceptions about evaluators held by school boards and school administrators indicated that "few LEA users speak frequently with program evaluators about the programs they are studying" (p.9). Support for similar findings are to be found in other studies (e.g., David 1981; Lyon, Doscher, McGranahan, & Williams, 1978). Achieving communication between district decision-makers and evaluators seems to be an important first step in improving the use of evaluation research in school districts.

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